**Choice Research**

**Gyms**

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| In brief |
| * Some people raved about the staff and services at their gym, and about its **positive impact** on their **health** and **lifestyle**. Others thought their gym was more focused on **making money** than helping members. * The quality of service, facilities and staff seems to **vary a great deal** within the industry — see [**Every figure tells a story**](http://www.choice.com.au/goArticle.aspx?ID=104348&p=09#figure), for an overview. So know your rights and shop around before joining up. |

Earlier this year, the Victorian Minister of Consumer Affairs issued a warning to examine gym contracts carefully before signing up. This was a response to a **32% increase** in the number of **complaints** received by Consumer Affairs Victoria about gyms and the fitness industry.

Interested in discovering the scope and prevalence of consumer issues with regard to gyms, CHOICE conducted an Australia-wide online survey (see [**Our gym survey**](http://www.choice.com.au/goArticle.aspx?ID=104348&p=09)). We wanted to see if there were any areas of gym membership where particularly **good** or **bad practices** were prevalent, and to alert consumers to what to look for when joining.

Of the 948 survey respondents, the majority were happy with their gym and hadn’t had any problems.

However, a **significant minority** reported negative experiences, in particular high-pressure sales tactics, staff more interested in making money than providing instruction and advice, and neglect of medical risk responsibilities.

Here are the highlights of our findings, and tips on how to get the most out of your gym membership.

**Joining up**

In an ideal world — one where all gyms follow the guidelines in their [**state’s code of practice**](http://www.choice.com.au/goArticle.aspx?ID=104348&p=04#Code) — all signing-up experiences would be like this. However, our survey findings suggest the real world’s very different.

A common complaint (14% of members in our survey) was that they were induced by special offers and an invitation to inspect facilities, then felt pressured to sign up. This figure increased to over 30% among members of two gym chains, FITNESS FIRST and FERNWOOD (see [**Gym chains**](http://www.choice.com.au/goArticle.aspx?ID=104348&p=08), for more on FITNESS FIRST and FERNWOOD).

"They gave me a tour and all the information and left it to me to make a decision whenever I was ready. I was welcome to ask any questions at any time, and to inspect facilities again if I needed to. It was all very relaxed."

Most codes of practice say gyms shouldn’t use **high-pressure tactics**, harassment or coercion to get people to join up. However, exactly what constitutes ‘high pressure’, etc, may largely be a matter of interpretation.

Not being offered a monthly payment option (8%) and being offered a chance to pay upfront fees for a membership longer than one year (7%) are also potential breaches of the codes of practice.

Other complaints included not being made aware of the full price of services offered (8%), feeling misled about the services and facilities on offer (6%) and feeling misled by special offers as to the true cost of membership (5%).

All in all, 31% of gym members in our survey felt they had experienced some form of unfair or high-pressure sales tactics when signing up.

**What to look out for**

* Don’t succumb to **high-pressure sales tactics**. Take your time to look around, consider the membership options on offer, and check out other gyms.
* Don’t be swayed by special offers available for **‘today only’**. Chances are, if you go back after you’ve thought about it, the offer will still stand.
* Ask **questions** before you sign anything. If they’re not interested in helping you during the money-extraction phase, they’re even less likely to want to help you achieve your health and fitness goals after you’ve joined.
* Know your **rights** — familiarise yourself with your state’s code of practice before joining (see [**How fit’s the industry?**](http://www.choice.com.au/goArticle.aspx?ID=104348&p=07)).

**Medical matters**

All codes of practice require gyms to screen potential members for **pre-existing medical conditions** that might put them at risk during exercise. **20%** of respondents weren’t asked to fill in a medical questionnaire — which would be the ideal way of screening for potential problems — although they may have been verbally screened. Among those who indicated they did have a medical risk, it was essentially **ignored** in **18%** of cases, with no further questions asked.

"During my medical screening my blood pressure was taken and was very high. The gym wouldn’t proceed with my membership until I’d sought advice from a doctor. After taking medication, it was low enough to satisfy the gym’s requirements, and so my membership started. If I hadn’t done the medical, I probably wouldn’t have found out about my condition for some time."

**What to look out for**

* It’s in your interests, as well as the gym’s, to alert them about any **health issues** such as high blood pressure, previous or current injuries, pregnancy and so on. A formal questionnaire and basic medical check-up is ideal, but if it’s not offered, volunteer any potential problems.
* When signing the contract, make sure you’re clear on your rights regarding **suspension** or **termination** of the membership due to illness or injury (see [**Terms and conditions**](http://www.choice.com.au/goArticle.aspx?ID=104348&p=06)).

**This article last reviewed July 2004**

**Member assistance**

One of the **key objectives** in most codes of practice is to provide a standard of service that **protects the health and well-being of clients**. To us this suggests ensuring members know how to use equipment safely and effectively; having **trained staff** supervising workouts and offering advice to members where appropriate; and helping members achieve their goals.

"It’s pretty much every man for himself — they don’t offer to assess your fitness levels, demonstrate the equipment or devise a program for you unless you’re willing to fork out extra for a personal trainer."

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| While most people were happy with the fitness advice and instruction provided, a **significant minority** felt it didn’t meet expectations:   * 22% weren’t shown how to use **gym equipment**. * 36% weren’t advised on an appropriate **exercise program**. * 39% weren’t offered a **fitness assessment**. |

"In my experience they never have people patrolling the gym to make sure people are doing the exercises/weights properly and safely.”

There are plenty of gym veterans who know what they’re doing and are happy to rock up, do their thing and mind their own business. But for people new to the gym scene — or even new to exercise — instruction and advice are especially important. And when you’ve already paid a lot for membership, to then discover you have to **pay more for a personal trainer** to guide you (as happened to several survey respondents), the temptation may be to **go ahead on your own**, risking injury and perhaps not getting as much out of it as you could.

A significant issue for many was that rather than having staff available for general supervision and advice, the floor staff are apparently more interested in touting for their personal training businesses than giving advice:

"The only time I was approached by a staff member offering me assistance was when he had an ulterior motive — trying to sell me personal training at additional cost."

**What to look out for**

Before signing up, be very clear about **what services** are included in the membership:

* Are **fitness assessments** included? Free or an extra charge? How many and how often? What do they involve?
* Does the gym provide you with a **program** to help you meet your health and fitness goals? Are there any **costs** involved? How often is it revised?
* Are you shown how to use **equipment**? Is this included in your joining fee, or do you have to **pay extra**? Can it be **spread out** over several sessions if you’re new to gyms?

**Joining a gym could be this good ….**

Megan Mackinney of Brisbane has been a member of her gym for over a year now, and is very happy with the staff, the environment and the financial side of things.

"I was given the opportunity to join on a month-by-month basis, with no cancellation fee. They also **reduced the $150 joining fee to $50** as part of a special offer."

"The monthly fee was gradually reduced each month that I stayed a member. When I was satisfied that I’d continue to use the gym, I signed up for a year and was offered an extra month free of charge."

"I was very pleased to have these options, as I’ve never been a gym member before and it allowed me to see if I **liked the gym** and develop a **routine** before committing to a full year."

**This article last reviewed July 2004**

**The gym environment**

Most people were **happy** with their gym’s atmosphere and culture, but some of the following comments give you an idea of aspects to check when you’re shopping around.

* "I'm very happy with my current gym. It has a very relaxed, friendly atmosphere, with all shapes and sizes feeling welcome and comfortable training there."
* "Music too loud, and caters for the under 20s — who are also very beautiful."
* "I find it annoying that there are lots of guys who swear and make a noise as they lift weights."
* "I often find the aerobics classes are too full, especially when a new routine is introduced."
* "Showers and change rooms are appalling — no space to hang towel at shower, no shelves in showers, often no hot water."

As many of our respondents noted, the **atmosphere** and **clientele** of a gym can make a big difference to your comfort and enjoyment — and hence how much value you’ll get from the gym. It may help to visit at a **time you’re likely to be attending** (lunchtime, after work, Sunday mornings, whenever) and check out the scene.

**What to look out for**

* Is it very **crowded**? Are classes **heavily** subscribed? Are there **queues** for equipment?
* Is the **ambience** (music, lighting, TV monitors, etc) to your liking?
* Will you feel **comfortable** among the **clientele**?
* Check out the **atmosphere**: hot and sweaty, stuffy, air-conditioned, open windows onto heavily trafficked streets, airy and spacious?
* Is the **equipment** clean and well-maintained? Are **towels** required when working out (and is it enforced)? What are the **showers** and **change rooms** like?
* Is **drinking water** available on the gym floor?
* If relevant to you, does the gym offer **childcare**? What are the **hours**, and how much does it **cost**? Can you **book** in advance?

**Does a code of practice make a difference?**

Most states and the ACT have a **code of practice for the fitness industry**. In WA the code has been drafted and endorsed by the relevant bodies, and is awaiting consideration by parliament. In the ACT and Queensland all gyms must be signatories to these codes; in other states it’s voluntary.

The codes of practice have policies in place that aim to ensure the **health, safety** and **wellbeing of clients**; appropriate **trading standards** (including marketing practices) within the industry; and that adequate **complaints resolution** procedures are available.

While you might think that joining a gym that complies with the state’s code of practice would be some guarantee of standards, it’s not necessarily the case: we received many complaints about such gyms. On the other hand, there’s some indication that the codes may be helping. For example, in Queensland, where the code is mandatory, only **20%** of people experienced **misleading** and **unfair sales tactics** (described in [**Joining up**](http://www.choice.com.au/goArticle.aspx?ID=104348&p=02)), compared with the **national average of 31%**.

See [**How fit’s the industry?**](http://www.choice.com.au/goArticle.aspx?ID=104348&p=07), for how to get hold of your state’s code of practice.

**This article last reviewed July 2004**

**Membership cancellation**

A small number of people in our survey (3%) complained about **money continuing to be debited** from their account after they’d stopped going to the gym. Consumer affairs and fair trading departments in Queensland and Victoria have also publicised this issue, with many cases coming to them every year.

"I asked for a 12-month contract and it wasn’t explained that at the end of 12 months I would have to give a month’s notice to cancel the membership. I ended up paying for an additional four months because I didn’t check my credit card statement properly. My previous gym sent me letters to find out where I was if I hadn’t been in for a week!"

The problem arises when people sign what they believe is a **12-month contract**, and assume (quite reasonably) that at the end of 12 months they stop going and stop paying, unless they choose to renew the contract.

In the **fine print**, however, it’s usually stated that you have to give written notice (say one month) of your intention to discontinue membership and to stop payments being debited from your account.

So don’t automatically assume that at the end of 12 months (or however long you’ve signed up for) your time is up. If you’re fortunate enough to be with a gym that gives you a friendly prod if you haven’t turned up for a while, you’re less likely to get caught unawares.

We’d like to see universal adoption of the **‘ongoing agreement’ policy** in the Queensland code of practice: members must be alerted in writing **two months** before their initial sign-up period is due to end, and warned that membership (and by implication the direct debit) **will continue** after this time unless the member terminates the membership agreement.

**Is a gym for you?**

* "During my membership I have achieved my desired weight loss of 13 kg, my blood pressure has returned to better than normal and my resting pulse compares with a person half my age. Overall I’m a damn sight healthier than I was 13 months ago."
* "I think gyms are overrated. I feel I can manage a better program out in the park by myself or with a buddy than in a gym. I only go for classes now."

If you’ve never been to a gym, it’s hard to know if it’ll suit you. For some people, it’s been a revelation and a joy. For others, there’s an initial enthusiasm which gradually wanes, and attending becomes a nuisance and a chore — **almost half** the people in our survey who’d quit their gym did so because they didn’t go **often enough** to make it worthwhile. For many people, though, a gym is simply part of their regular exercise regimen — **a fact of life**, rather than fun or torture.

To check out a gym properly, see if you can get a **short-term membership** (a month, say), try a few casual visits or invest in a multi-visit pass (where you buy a certain number of casual visits at a discount; unfortunately many gyms don’t offer them). Given that many people seem to attend their new gym with great enthusiasm for a few weeks or even months, then lose interest, a series of these short-term options may prove the **best way** to find the right gym for you — and **determine your staying power**.

**This article last reviewed July 2004**

**Terms and conditions**

Most people felt the terms and conditions of their membership were reasonable — although a large proportion weren’t able to tell us because they didn’t actually know what their conditions were. Obviously it’s in your interests to be aware of what you’re signing up for, so that if issues come up with your membership you know where you stand.

"I was refused an extension on my membership, having not been there for two weeks due to an injured ankle. They said I was meant to tell them in advance. So I said, next time I should ring up the day before and tell you I’m going to hurt my ankle, and in all seriousness he said yes! As it turns out, if I’d told them when I did get hurt I would have got an extension, but I didn’t tell them until I went back when my ankle was better."

**What to look out for**

Here’s a list of terms and conditions you should check on the contract:  
  
**Fees**

* Initial **joining** fee.
* **Direct debit** service set-up fees.
* **Membership fees** and frequency of payment.
* Any **additional** fees required for each visit.
* Fees for **fitness services** (fitness assessments, sessions with personal trainers).
* Any **other** fees for which you may be liable.

**Suspending membership**

* **Circumstances** under which you may suspend your membership (such as illness, injury or holiday).
* **Annual allowances** (how many weeks per year you’re allowed ‘off’), and the minimum and maximum time periods allowed (for example, there may be a two-week minimum in one block).
* Amount of **advance notice** required.
* Any **fees** payable.

**Transferring membership to another gym or to another person**

* **Circumstances** (if any) under which you may transfer your membership.
* Amount of **notice** required.
* Other **requirements** on your part.
* Any **fees** payable.

**Terminating membership**

* **Circumstances** under which you may terminate your membership.
* **How** you go about it.
* Amount of **notice** required.
* **Fees** payable if the membership is terminated due to **sickness** or **disability**.
* **Fees** payable if the membership is terminated for **other** reasons.
* **Circumstances** under which the **gym** may terminate your membership.

**Cooling-off period after signing up**  
(That is, a chance to change your mind and get your money back.)

* **Required** in Queensland and the ACT, and **required for code of practice** signatories in NSW, SA and Victoria.
* **Length** of the cooling-off period.
* **How** to go about cancelling if you do **change** your mind.
* **Fees** payable.
* How any refund (minus fees payable) will be **paid**.

**This article last reviewed July 2004**

**How fit’s the industry?**

**Fitness Australia** is the representative body for the fitness industry in Australia. A gym displaying a **Fitness Australia Recognised Provider** sign indicates it’s a member of its state industry association and should meet minimum national standards for service quality and consumer protection. Each **state** and **territory has its own body** (except the NT, where it’s coming), which reports to Fitness Australia.

If you have a complaint that can’t be resolved with your gym’s management, take it to the **state’s Fitness Association**. If you get no joy there, go to your state’s department of consumer affairs or fair trading.

**Staff qualifications**

Gym and fitness staff can be qualified as fitness instructors or fitness trainers.

* Fitness instructors require a **Certificate III in fitness** from the National Fitness Training package, and specialise in leading aerobics or aqua classes, or being a gym instructor.
* Fitness trainers require **Certificate IV in fitness**, and specialise in personal training or training specific populations (such as older adults or people with a disability).

An industry-approved **first-aid certificate** is also required for both levels.

Unfortunately many people who claim to be ‘personal trainers’ haven’t in fact completed **Certificate IV** — up to 30%, according to Fitness Australia. You can check that gym staff members are qualified as Fitness Australia professionals — they have an ID card. However, not all qualified gym staff choose to register with Fitness Australia — it estimates only about **60%** do. While non-registered personal trainers are unlikely to carry a diploma around with them, you can at least ask about qualifications and use your discretion.

**Contacts**

You can access codes of practice for the ACT, NSW, Queensland, SA and Victoria through their state fitness body’s website; contact details and (where available) web addresses for all the state bodies are provided on the Fitness Australia website, [**www.fitnessaustralia.com.au**](http://www.fitnessaustralia.com.au). Most state organisations are called Fitness Victoria, Fitness Tasmania, etc, though in SA the relevant organisation is Recreation South Australia.

**This article last reviewed July 2004**

**Gym chains**

Joining a health club chain can be a good idea if you **travel** around the country, or if it’s useful having a branch near **home** as well as one near **work**. If this type of flexibility is the main reason for your joining a chain, check the **conditions** and make sure there’s no penalty for using a **‘non-home’ gym**. It’s also worth bearing in mind that pricing structures may vary between branches — so it might be cheaper to join at one location and attend another.

Quite a few survey respondents belong to one of Australia’s two major health club chains, FITNESS FIRST (16% of respondents) and FERNWOOD (a women-only gym — 8%), so we can give some detail about experiences with these chains.

**Fitness First**

"I was very surprised when I joined this gym that I wasn’t given a tour of the facilities and an explanation of how the equipment operated. When I enquired about this, they told me that I’d have to book and pay for a session with one of the gym’s personal trainers."

Fitness first logoFITNESS FIRST is now the largest health and fitness operator in Australia, with 32 centres throughout the country, and centres in 13 other countries.

It claims it’s dedicated to ensuring each member has an exceptional experience on every visit to the club — that they will find comfortable surroundings, inspiring images, friendly staff and members, and the latest in programs and equipment.

* We found that compared with other gyms, FITNESS FIRST respondents were less likely to have been shown how to use equipment by a qualified staff member, offered a fitness assessment or advised on an appropriate exercise routine.
* They were also more likely to report being subjected to high-pressure sales.

**Fernwood**

"The personal trainers at Fernwood are terrific. It’s just the day-to-day staff who act like commissioned sales people."

Fernwood logoFERNWOOD has 54 clubs throughout Australia and plans to open more. It claims to offer women a safe, secure, supportive environment where they can exercise, slim and learn about good nutrition and weight management.

* We found that compared with other gyms, FERNWOOD members were more likely to report that staff offer advice and support — most were shown how to use equipment by a qualified staff member and advised on appropriate exercise routines, with staff readily available.
* However, like FITNESS FIRST members, there were more complaints than average about high-pressure sales.

**Gym problems**

Michael of Sydney had problems with his gym from go to whoa. "No orientation was included (as in showing you how to use the equipment and showing you around the facilities) when joining. If you wanted someone to show you around you had to pay for a **minimum three sessions** with a personal trainer. The additional cost was **$70 an hour** or **$60 an hour for 10 sessions if paid upfront**."

Michael says the service provided was worthwhile in the long run but it wasn’t exactly smooth sailing: "The personal trainer was unreliable and wasn’t prepared to train early in the morning when it was convenient for me — and consequently wouldn’t turn up."

"I wrote to request my membership be cancelled, but it wasn’t cancelled until one month after the request. So they still got another month out of me, despite the fact that I hadn’t been for the last three months."

**This article last reviewed July 2004**

**Our gym survey**

Within days of the gym questionnaire appearing on our website, we received a letter from Ian Grainger, the CEO of **Fitness Australia** (see [**How fit’s the industry?**](http://www.choice.com.au/goArticle.aspx?ID=104348&p=07)), who was concerned that the questionnaire emphasised negative, rather than positive, aspects of gym membership.

We considered his arguments and looked again at our survey, but concluded it was well-designed for the purposes of our investigation: we wanted to be able to report the **potential pitfalls** of gym membership so that consumers can be more aware of what to look out for when joining one, and highlight the differences between **good** and **bad gym service**. We provided plenty of opportunities for people to add positive comments — which they did.

For as we expected, the majority of the 948 respondents were happy with their gyms, and hadn’t experienced any serious problems.  
  
However, as this article shows, a significant minority of people also had negative experiences. We hope **Fitness Australia** will use our findings to improve areas in its industry that can be seen to be less than top-quality.

**Every figure tells a story**

Experiences reported in our survey:

* Not informed of **eligible discounts**: 10%
* Not given a **medical questionnaire** to fill in: 20%
* Not shown how to use **gym equipment**: 22%
* Not advised on an appropriate **exercise program**: 36%
* Not offered a **fitness assessment**: 39%

**This article last reviewed July 2004**